

# Control and evaluation of information resources by "container" curation

## Control y evaluación de recursos de información en clave de "continent" curation

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**Abstract:** In this article, we examine the need to re-interpret the control and evaluation of information resources in an environment of online searches and information use that is dominated by search engines and social networks. Taking into account the recent announcement of the end of the ALA's prestigious *Guide to reference*, preceded several years ago by the disappearance of selective directories of web resources, including *Intute*, we explore the potential of content curation as a conceptual and methodological approach that can also be applied to the control and evaluation of quality information resources. These resources can be viewed as "containers" with a clear identity, whose "contents" experience a kind of dissolution within search engines and social networks. Here, we propose the concept of "container curation" as a method for evaluating and contextualising information resources within the realm of libraries and information literacy.

**Keywords:** Content curation; Container curation; Information resources; Reference resources; Evaluation; Libraries; Information literacy; Subject hubs; Library guides.

**Resumen:** Reflexión sobre la necesidad de reinterpretar el control y evaluación de recursos de información en un entorno de búsqueda y uso de la información dominado por los buscadores web y las redes sociales. Partiendo de la noticia del cierre de la prestigiosa *Guide to reference* de la ALA, precedida años atrás por la desaparición de muchos directorios selectivos de recursos web como *Intute*, se pretende explorar el potencial de la *content curation* como enfoque conceptual y metodológico aplicable también al control y evaluación de recursos de información de calidad. Estos recursos se pueden entender como "continentes" con personalidad propia cuyos "contenidos" experimentan una suerte de disolución en buscadores y redes sociales. De ahí que se proponga en este trabajo el concepto de *continent curation* como mecanismo de valorización y contextualización de los recursos de información en el discurso bibliotecario y de la alfabetización informacional.

**Palabras clave:** *Content curation*; *Continent curation*; Recursos de información; Recursos de referencia; Evaluación, Bibliotecas; Alfabetización informacional; Portales temáticos; Guías temáticas.

## Introduction

Discussions on trends in our sector have covered many topics in recent years. One of these is the emergence of the concept of content curation and its potential expression in a new professional profile, that of content curator (**Guallar; Leiva-Aguilera**, 2013). Although it has various precedents, the debate on content curation is relatively recent. The first clear definition of the concept is attributed to **Rohit Bhargava**, who, in a short post entitled *Manifesto for the*

*content curator* (2009), highlighted the need for an activity whose main aim would be "to find the best and most relevant content and bring it forward". In the *Manifesto*, Bhargava stated that search engines would be ineffective against the exponential, rapid increase in contents on the social web. Consequently, there is a need for content curators (people, not mere algorithms) whose work involves filtering and presenting in an "edited" way to a specific audience an "account" of the essential information on a topic.



Guide to reference

<http://www.guidetoreference.org/HomePage.aspx>

## Crisis in the traditional evaluation of resources

The nature of a trending topic, which many associate with content curation, contrasts with shortfalls in the control and evaluation of information resources. The announcement in the summer of 2015 piqued my interest in content curation, its commitment to the analysis and selection of information by humans and its strategies to disseminate selected information to an audience.

The first was an announcement made by ALA Editions stating that in 2016 it would shut down its online directory the *Guide to reference*. This directory had been launched on the internet in 2008, and was the continuation of the ALA's well-known *Guide to reference books*, which in turn was based on the *Guide to the study and use of reference books* – humble notes published in 1902 by Alice-Bertha Kroeger for her students at Drexel University.

<http://guidetoreference.org>

The second announcement was the decision to permanently shut down the directory IPL2: *Information you can trust*. This directory was started in 1995 by the *School of Information* at the *University of Michigan*, with the participation of students. It was subsequently maintained under the same voluntary arrangement by a consortium led by the *College of Computing and*

*Informatics* at *Drexel University*.

<http://www.ipl.org>

Beyond the coincidence that linked the start of one directory and the end of another at *Drexel University*, both closures are further evidence of current difficulties in undertaking large-scale projects to control, evaluate and select internet information resources, based on the voluntary or paid work of information professionals. These difficulties were expressed brilliantly when a decision was made in 2010 to close *Intute*<sup>1</sup>, a prestigious portal for the selection of internet resources founded in 2006 by the *JISC* (United Kingdom) to group the subject hubs of the *Resource Discovery Network* (RDN):

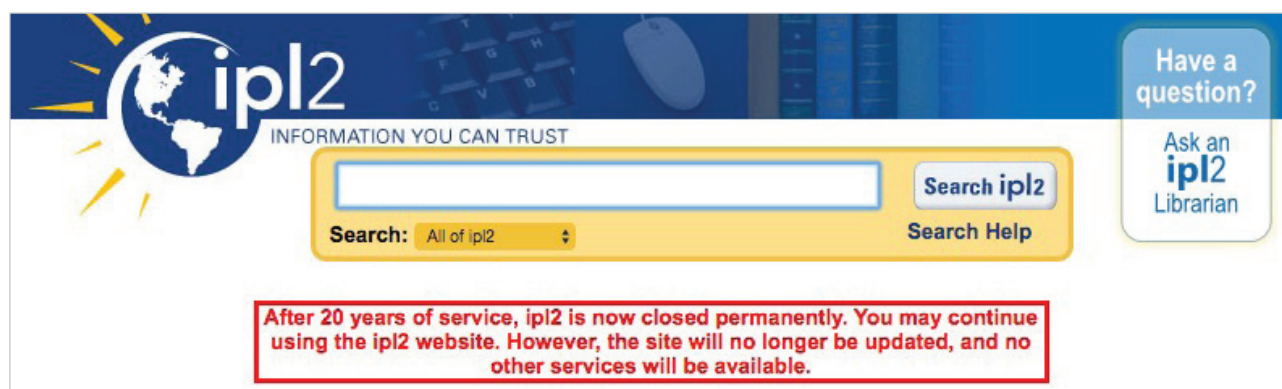
The problems that led to the creation of the RDN hubs, that is the need to find quality resources and make sense of the Internet, are still pressing issues today, and throughout its history *Intute* has helped students to make discerning use of the Internet through community collaboration. However, technological developments, changing user expectations and diminishing budgets mean that services such as *Intute* will need to find new ways to engage with their communities, and the search for alternative business models will require new ways of thinking. (Joyce et al., 2010)

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**"The nature of a trending topic, which many associate with content curation, contrasts with shortfalls in the control and evaluation of information resources"**

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RDN and *Intute* were the main leaders of a "human and professional" approach to the control of web resources at the start of the twenty-



<http://www.ipl.org>

first century. Expectations of their performance were high among the library community, which at that time was studying how to process and catalogue internet resources (Estivill; Abadal, 2000; Rodríguez-Yunta, 2004). Towards the end of the decade, this kind of gateway and portal tried to find its place in an increasingly complex environment, which Abadal and Codina (2008) called "the postmodern era of online searches" in a *ThinkEPI* note. These authors differentiated between the future downfall of major internet directories such as *Yahoo directory* and the more promising future of subject hubs.

However, just two years later, *Intute* joined the club of web directories that had shut up shop, whilst *Yahoo directory* continued to languish until its closure in December 2014, four years later (Sullivan, 2014). The situation was contradictory whilst it seemed more important than ever "to find the best and most relevant content and bring it forward", in the words of Bhargava (2009), products with recognised value in this process of evaluating and selecting information, such as *Intute* and the *Guide to reference*, had to close. Possible reasons for their demise include the lack of a regular, large enough audience to make them financially sustainable in the commercial environment, or sufficient attractiveness to capture public funds or private sponsorship.

University library professionals and researchers were the main target audience. However, this group is fairly small if we consider the scale of the internet. These two directories were not generally consulted to resolve specific information needs on a regular basis. Instead, they tended to be used as a benchmark to establish reference collections and to make decisions on what resources "to try" as a first step before incorporating them into the professional tool box. Perhaps their future would have been more secure as an alerts service providing reviews and news of resources, which is something that various professional journals already do. Furthermore, online social spaces for

specific groups of professionals or researchers have become an excellent alternative source of first-hand knowledge of the group's information resources, provided in context.

### What the struggle between directories and search engines teaches us

Once the "competition" stage with search engines was over, the main directories did not know how to respond by adapting to the culture of the social web and crowdsourcing. Although *Yahoo directory* and many other similar directories survived by moving to their pages the suggestions of users or website creators, they did this without much contribution in terms of evaluation and comments. These were not really examples of what is known as culture 2.0, which consists in mobilising a certain collective intelligence that has found its highest expression in the success of Wikipedia.

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**"Users will increasingly look to more personalised environments for expert advice on which leading resources to select. In these environments, there is very strong filtering due to the interaction of participants"**

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The case of the *DMOZ* directory is interesting. This was started up in 1998 as a resource that was entirely dependent on the input of volunteers. Apparently, it is still in operation<sup>2</sup>. However, although it preceded *Wikipedia* as a crowdsourcing information resource, it has not had the same success as the web encyclopedia par excellence.

<http://www.dmoz.org>

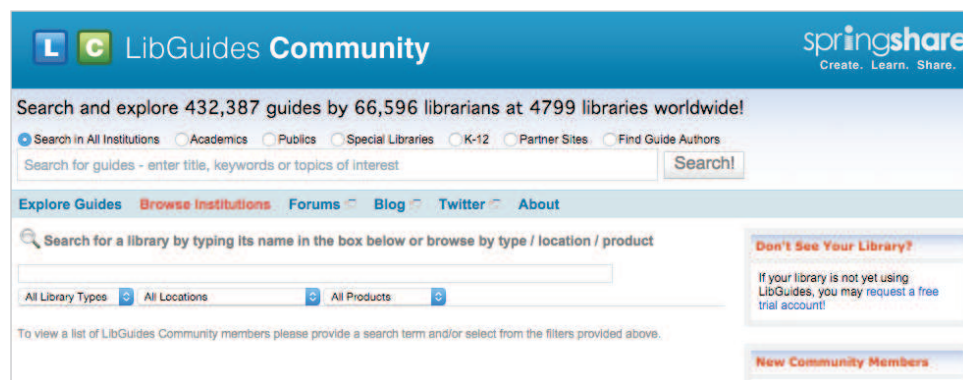
The reason does not lie in whether the maintenance of a directory reflects the 2.0 philoso-

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phy, but in the fact that searching for information in this new environment has been reinforced by more effective search engines, and netsurfing as a way to carry out a search has shifted in part to the social web. The current trend supports the idea that users will increasingly look to more personalised environments for expert advice on which leading resources to select. In these environments, there is very strong filtering due to the interaction of participants, and the focus is a very well-defined topic or function.

"Support for the concept of container curation also emerges largely in response to a need to overcome the trend of having just one container, one window, which is promoted by Google"



LibGuides Community

<http://libguides.com/community.php?m=i&ref=libguides.com>

### Small is beautiful: library guides

Although numerous web directories of resources exist, they are not a valid alternative to the major search engines or to large collective library catalogues if a user wants a search to be integrated with traditional resources. Therefore, efforts to achieve greater added value via selection, evaluation and comments no longer have a future in directories with a large volume of information (defined as over a thousand items in a specific library or library network, or over 120,000 items in directories such as *Intute*). All evidence indicates that the best strategy would be to promote a range of options, including blogs providing reviews and news of resources, library guides, and tutorials. All of these products should be easy to locate by being well-ranked on search engines and incorporated into social networks, teaching platforms or online forums for group research.

The resurgence of library guides (Emanuel, 2013; Puckett, 2015) could be included in this trend. This resurgence has been particularly dynamic in libraries that have opted for *LibGuides* such as CMS, to create and manage guides using a common platform.

<http://springshare.com/libguides>

With all due caution, *LibGuides Community*, the database that indexes 432,066 guides created by 4,799 libraries, provides an experience that could partly replace *Intute*. However, unfortunately it is based on a keyword search that has many limitations.

<http://libguides.com/community>

To sum up, the renewed interest in resource guides that are well-delimited by subject and type, updated continuously, and aimed at a very well-defined audience has elements in common with the principles and methods of content curation. These guides order resources according to a taxonomy and on the basis of "accounts" applied

The inclusion on results pages of extracts of contents from the resources returned by a search engine, as well as rich snippets, gives users an idea of quality sources that they can access directly from the search engine. However, this also dilutes the identity of each source (each container) in what for many users is the only source: *Google*. Consequently, the information resources (interpreted as containers) are invisible behind the search engines, and therefore need the type of attention that we could associate with the traditional meaning of the term "curation" used in museum science.

Support for the concept of container curation also emerges largely in response to a need to overcome the trend of having just one container, one window, which is promoted by *Google*. A common phrase today is "I'll find it on *Google*", in reference to the fact that content can be accessed from the *Google* results page, where it lands in a way that is disconnected from its real container. This "user experience", which breaks down others' contents and containers, is easy and convenient for undemanding users, but represents a loss of value in the process of searching for information.

to meeting defined information needs or supporting specific operations.

## Questions for discussion

From the above reflections, more doubts than certainties emerge about how to rediscover and reinterpret the evaluation and selection of information resources in terms of "container curation". Some of these doubts are expressed in the questions below:

- Can the concept of curation be applied to the container in the same way that it is applied to the content?
- Can container curation be used to mean something different to content curation? What distinguishes them?
- What business model explains the sustainability of professional projects (created by specialists) that can be classified under content curation?
- What does content curation contribute to a different way of "thinking" the internet and the user experience?
- Do web analytics and big data applied to automatic personalisation of contents already offer alternatives to content curation?
- What competition do crowdsourcing and the emergence of specialised social networks represent for a professional approach to the evaluation and selection of information resources?
- Are general social networks the right place to connect with users and present an account of information resources? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to consider the social functions of specific websites for learning aimed at specific groups of students?

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**"Can the concept of curation be applied to the container in the same way that it is applied to the content?"**

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I do not have clear answers to these questions. Perhaps the professional practice of content curation will gradually discover if there is a path from "content to container".

## Notes

1. The *Guide to reference* or that of *IPL2* are no longer updated, but can still be consulted. In contrast, you can only see what Intute was like by accessing the *Web Archive*. After several years of offering access to the portal's old data, JISC decided to shut it down completely. [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/intute.ac.uk](https://web.archive.org/web/*/intute.ac.uk)

2. The rather unkempt appearance of *DMOZ* together with the fact that many of its introduction and help pages have not been updated spark concerns about whether this project is still up and running or has become a "zombie".

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